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ABSTRACT

The National Conference on Rural Education, a major event in the 1979 calendar of the Education Department of Western Australia, was held under the auspices of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Educationalists, government, and community representatives from throughout Australia gathered in Perth, together with a panel of experts from England, Scotland, Sweden, the United States, New Zealand, and the OECD Secretariat to review the present state of rural education in Australia and to consider new directions for the future. The first of three sections of this conference report explains the administrative, demographic, and economic context within which rural education operates in Australia. The second describes the major policy related conclusions reached at the conference and outlines the implications of these conclusions for the future of rural schools, the role of education in rural communities, the locus of decision-making, and sociologically produced pressures placed on schools. The final section provides a brief statement synthesizing the conference outcomes with emphasis on those which are expected to have the most impact on future developments. (AH)

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AUSTRALIA

NEW DIRECTIONS IN RURAL EDUCATION

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CONFERENCE REPORT

A NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RURAL EDUCATION

ORGANIZED BY THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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RC 014098

New Directions in Rural Education

A National Conference on Rural Education

CONFERENCE REPORT

Research Branch

Education Department of Western Australia

April, 1980

CONFERENCE REPORT

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FOREWORD

The National Conference on Rural Education was a major event in the 1979 calendar of the Education Department of Western Australia. It was held under the auspices of the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Educationists, and government and community representatives from throughout Australia gathered in Perth, together with a panel of experts from England, Scotland, Sweden, the United States, New Zealand and the OECD Secretariat. Their purpose was to review the present state of rural education in Australia and to consider new directions for the future. The success of this major undertaking was due in no small way to the Conference Planning Committee, as well as to the fine contributions made by many of the participants. The longer term 'successes', are of course, still to be won. There is no doubt at all, however, that the basis for significant improvement in provision of rural education has been established by the Conference proceedings.

This Conference report has been written principally for education and other government authorities responsible for providing rural services and for the OECD. It provides an overview of general directions and major issues which arose from the Conference and which have particular relevance to policy makers. It has not been the intention to spell out specific solutions to specific problems. This is an activity much more appropriately pursued by individual authorities which have their own distinctive circumstances and priorities. In fact, already my own Department has begun the process of reviewing the Conference proceedings and drawing policy implications. Major modifications and new developments will certainly emerge.

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The Conference was arranged to allow for the broadest discussion of rural education issues. Hence, it was pleasing to note the full participation of not only educationists but also parents, prominent community representatives, and experts from business and rural industry. Given this diverse representation, it was not expected that the discussions would achieve a consensus viewpoint on major issues. Nevertheless, broad threads of agreement did run through the Conference proceedings and as far as possible, these have been incorporated in the report. It should be pointed out that the views contained in the report do not represent any official position of the OECD/CERI.

The major Conference papers will be published either in book form or as monographs. They should become available towards the end of 1980. Enquiries regarding their availability should be addressed to the Research Branch of the Education Department of Western Australia.

I wish to thank the authors of the report—Mr M. Angus, the head of the Research Branch; Mr P. Dunnell and Ms S. Brown, research officers in that Branch.

D. Mossenson

DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EDUCATION
EDUCATION DEPARTMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

1.0 INTRODUCTION

During 1977 the Education Department of Western Australia was designated by Commonwealth authorities to represent Australia in the OECD/CERI project, Basic Education and Teacher Support in Sparsely Populated Areas (SPA). Representatives from Western Australia attended several conferences and submitted two case study reports describing innovations in rural education in Western Australia. At the final SPA conference in Aurillac, France in December 1978 delegates from the twelve participating OECD countries, including Australia, agreed that future seminars or conferences on rural education should be held in the rural areas of participating countries, rather than in Paris.

With this in mind, Australian authorities subsequently proposed to the OECD/CERI Secretariat that a follow-up conference be held in Western Australia under the joint auspices of OECD/CERI and the Education Department of Western Australia.

Western Australian interests in hosting the Conference were several-fold. Firstly, the Conference was regarded as a mechanism for reviewing the major achievements, needs, aims and directions in rural education in Australia. Such an exercise was considered timely. It was anticipated that this review, conducted in the light of the reports emanating from the OECD/CERI SPA project, would produce a means whereby new trends, or redirected emphases in rural education might emerge.

Secondly, the SPA experience suggested that there was much that Australia could learn from developments in other OECD countries. Having a team of international experts examine local developments and then share impressions with Australian community leaders, educationists, academics, government officials, and, others from a wide cross section of the Australian community, seemed to be a wholly worthwhile activity.

A third factor influencing the decision to hold the conference was the Western Australian interest in the new OECD/CERI project, Education and Local Development (ELD). This new project builds upon work already undertaken in the SPA project. The Western Australian Conference would provide an opportunity to develop ideas and examine the assumptions underlying ELD in the Australian context.

1.1 The Conference

To accommodate the ambitious aims of the Conference, a programme of activities was devised extending over a period of three weeks in November, 1979. Activities included

- Acclimatization and familiarization tours by the international experts to a variety of rural settings in Western Australian.

- Public meetings and conferences in five regional centres. These provided an opportunity for local community members and local, overseas and interstate educators to meet, present and discuss issues of

particular importance to local conditions. The outcomes and discussions of these conferences became a major input into the later events. Between 50 and 100 persons attended each meeting and workshop.

- A four-day conference, held in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. This conference was attended by invited prominent overseas and Australian educators and government and community representatives. It had three major themes within which several topics were discussed using a workshop format for each. Approximately 60 persons attended each workshop.

  The first theme was entitled 'Education and Local Development'. It considered the fundamental question of the value and viability of maintaining small rural schools given changes in the demography of rural areas and the costs of delivering educational services. Workshop topics discussed under this theme included:

  - The economics of rural education.
  - School and community.
  - Demographic trends and their implications for schools.

  The second theme focused on the management and distribution of educational services in rural areas and questioned whether education is serving as well as it might, the interests of various communities and groups, such as Aborigines, rural youth, exceptional children, migrants and itinerant families. Workshop topics included:

- Provision for exceptional children.
- Provision for minority groups, including aboriginal children.
- Career opportunities for rural youth.
- A review of current government strategies.

The third theme focused on the extent to which rural schools require distinctive curricula and special resources. It examined the assertion that over recent years there have been increasing pressures to make rural schools more like urban schools, to the detriment, some would claim, of the rural communities. Workshop topics included

- Curricula for rural schools.
- Teacher development.
- Teaching strategies and school organization.
- Distance education.

- A one-day Workshop on Agricultural Education was held at an Agricultural District High School situated in the Western Australian wheatbelt. Eighty persons participated.

- A two-day Public Conference was held in Perth at which keynote addresses were given by international and local speakers and other participants were given the opportunity to meet in small groups to identify problems, discuss issues and propose action. More than 200 persons took part in this session.

- A post-conference briefing session was attended by the international team members and a small number of Australian education officials and policy analysts.

- Three one-day workshops were conducted with teachers and community members in remote centres in Western Australia. International visitors took part in these sessions.

This extensive programme reached hundreds of practitioners and people interested in rural education in Australia. Where possible, activities were arranged outside Perth, the major urban centre in Western Australia. Opportunities were made for people in rural areas to be given a voice in considering educational matters that affected their lives. The location of Conference activities is shown on Fig. 1 on the following page.

1.2 The report

This report contains three sections. The first section explains the administrative, demographic and economic context within which rural education operates in Australia. The second section, which contains the bulk of the report, describes the major policy related conclusions reached at the Conference and outlines the implications of these conclusions for the future development of education in rural areas of Australia. The third and final section of the report contains a brief statement which synthesises the Conference outcomes and emphasises those which are expected to have most impact on future developments in education in rural areas of Australia.

Figure 1

CONFERENCE CENTRES

2.0 THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

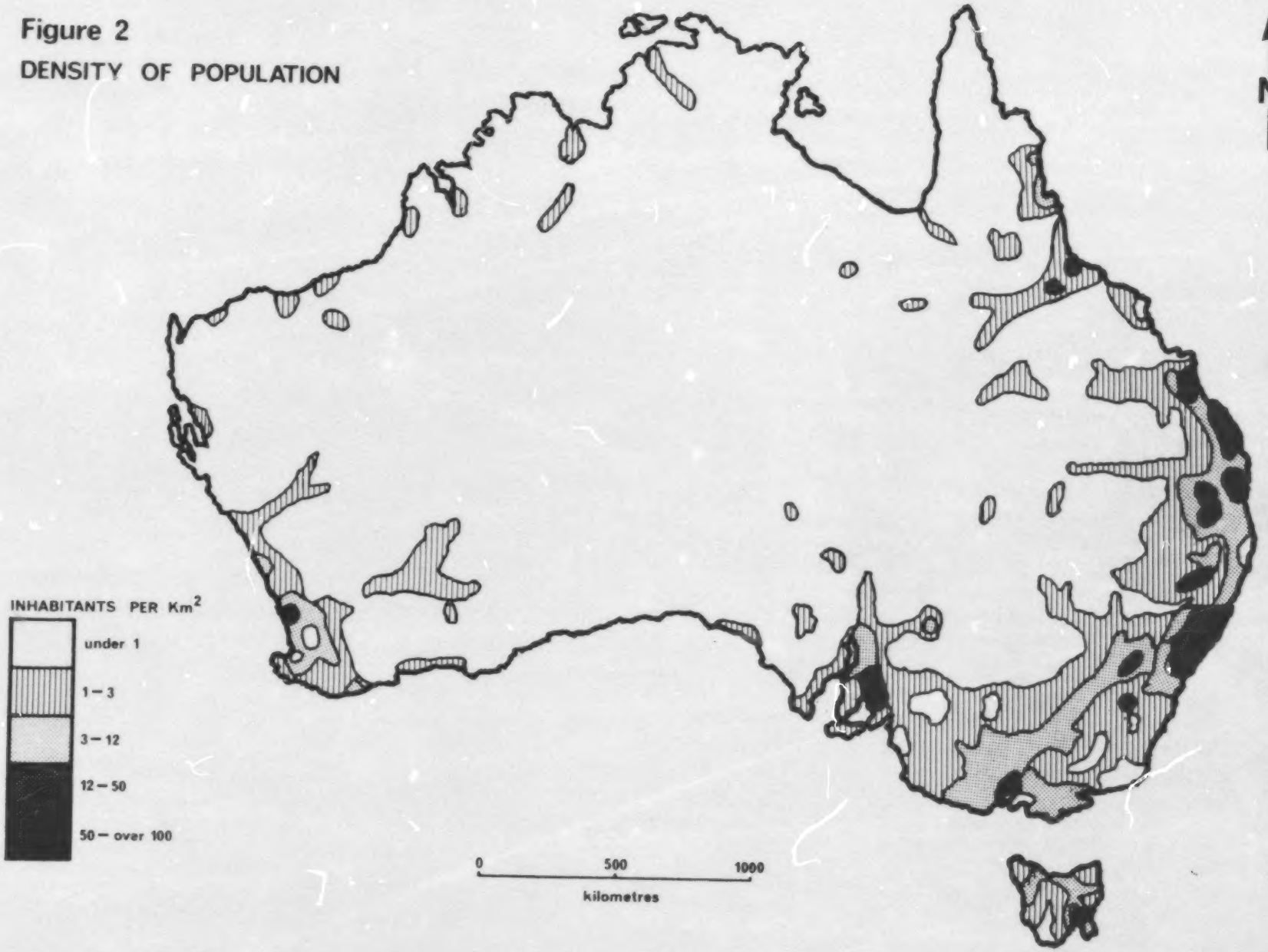
2.1 The geographic context

Visitors to Australia are impressed by the sheer size of the sparsely populated continent. When travelling from east coast to west coast, one covers approximately 4 200 kilometres, or the distance from London to Baghdad. However the picture that many people have acquired of Australia as a nation of sheep and wheat farmers is very much a myth. Only five per cent of Australia's workforce is engaged in rural industry. Approximately 70 per cent of Australia's population of 14.1 million are residents of the six State capitals and five other major cities, making Australia one of the most urbanised countries in the world. More than one out of three Australians live in Sydney or Melbourne. The distribution of Australia's population is shown in Fig. 2 on the following page. Whereas most of Western Europe has a population density of at least 30-50 persons per square kilometre, the figure shows that most parts of Australia have fewer than one person per square kilometre.

Western Australia, the host State, is by far the largest in the Commonwealth. It has an area approximately that of Western Europe. In contrast to its vast size, its population is only 1.2 million. Furthermore, 90 per cent of this population lives within 400 kilometres of the capital city. The average population density in the remainder of the State is less than one person per 10 square kilometres. The terrain is often harsh and rugged. Farms and settlements can be widely separated.

Figure 2

DENSITY OF POPULATION



2.2 The economic and demographic context

Many of Australia's rural areas have economies based on agriculture. In these areas there is evidence of a drift from the land. This trend seems likely to continue in the foreseeable future as the consolidation of farming properties continues. Mechanisation and the search for economies of scale suggest a continued erosion of job opportunities. Speculations have been made regarding the impact of rising fuel costs. Some people argue that it will reduce consolidation while others claim that it will hasten the decline of rural populations. Other factors including the effect of increasing labour costs, changes to national and state immigration patterns and the vagaries of the international markets for rural products, make accurate prediction of demographic and economic trends somewhat difficult.

An additional consideration is that although the continuing decline in rural population holds true generally, the overall patterns vary within States. In some circumstances, the trend is reversed. Exceptions to the declining rural population occur in instances of major mining development and in some cases in the growth of regional service centres. At this stage, the proliferation of "hobby" farms on the outskirts of urban areas and "back to the earth" alternative life-style movements seem unlikely to have any major impact on demographic trends in Australia.

Australia, like other OECD countries is experiencing an overall economic downturn. Somewhat paradoxically, the prospects for rural exports, primarily wool, grain, and beef, seem bright for the predictable future. However, these industries are not labour intensive and the results of buoyant market conditions and good seasons are not expected to have a significant impact upon rural demography, largely because they are unlikely to generate long term job opportunities.

The problem of unemployment generally, is more obvious in rural areas than in urban areas. Very small rural towns and rural centres which depend heavily on one or two industries, frequently offer few employment opportunities for local schools leavers. The situation is usually more critical for girls and minority groups such as Aboriginies.

The most significant minority group in rural areas of Australia are the indigenous Aboriginal peoples. In Western Australia, Aborigines constitute 13.4 percent of the population, most being in rural areas. Educationally, aboriginal children are characterized by lower than average school performance and shorter than usual participation in education. For a number of reasons, Aboriginals pose educational problems which are difficult to address. The majority of Aboriginals are enrolled in small numbers in many schools.

Here the problems of having students from different cultural backgrounds and possessing different value systems must be tackled in the 'normal' classroom by the 'normal' teachers. Most other Aborigines attend special schools set up in Aboriginal communities. Many of these Aborigines are further removed culturally from white society than are the former group, so the education they are offered must take into account these differences. Itinerancy of Aboriginal students is a further characteristic which poses problems for educators.

2.3 The educational context

(a) Responsibility and finance

Constitutionally, education is a responsibility of the State governments. Each State exercises this responsibility through a centrally organised State education department which is located in the capital city. These departments develop and administer the major policies applicable to government schools, especially those relating to staffing and resource allocations. The large majority of Australian school children attend government schools.

Non-government schools, while they cater for approximately 21 per cent of primary and secondary enrolments, tend to be located in urban areas. Only the Catholic education system administers a significant number of schools in rural areas, and most of these operate at the primary level. Non-government boarding schools, which are located

mainly in urban areas, provide an important educational service at the secondary level for people in rural areas.

More than 90 per cent of the recurrent costs and 70 per cent of the capital costs of providing primary and secondary education in government schools are met through funds allocated in state budgets. The remainder consists principally of specific purpose grants to the States from the Commonwealth Government[1]. There is no tradition of financing education through local taxation as in North America, and to a lesser extent, in European countries such as the United Kingdom. The little direct local funding of schools may account for the limited involvement in education of local government bodies and other local groups.

(b) Administration

Despite this centralization of educational finance, in recent years all government school systems have moved towards strengthening the roles of regions in the administration of education. The authority of the regional education offices varies from state to state. However, in

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1. The Schools Commission, a statutory authority advising the Commonwealth Minister for Education on the needs of schools, recommends grants to the states to assist with capital and recurrent expenditure in both government and non-government schools. Additionally, the Commonwealth Department of Education makes grants to students such as providing assistance with the education costs faced by students living in isolated areas.

theory at least, all major educational policy decisions are made by the central authorities though increasingly they are implemented through regional structures. Support services, especially those related to teacher development, and specialist services, are also increasingly being operated from regional offices.

Typically, the rural education regions cover huge tracts of the Australian countryside. An idea of the size of these regions can be obtained from Fig. 3 on the following page.

(c) General structure of rural education

One of the benefits of the centralized Australian school systems has been the achievement of comparable quality in educational services throughout each state, quite independent of the economic viability of the locality, the tax base of its community, or its geographic location. Schools are built, staffed and equipped through policies designed to provide comparable facilities and services throughout the state. Favourable financial loadings are allowed in areas where there are geographic, climatic or other logistic obstacles to the provision of education. Staffing policies have been developed which assist systems to maintain uniformity in the quality of teaching staff throughout all regions.

Figure 3
RURAL EDUCATIONAL REGIONS

The types of schools provided in rural communities are usually closely related to their size. Most rural centres have a primary school, some with as few as eight pupils. Larger towns also provide a senior high school offering education to Year 12. A distinctive feature of schools in some small rural centres is the combined primary and secondary school which provides educational services for all students of compulsory school age. Some even extend to post compulsory secondary education. This situation contrasts with the usual urban pattern of separate schools for primary and secondary students. There are 53 of these combined primary and secondaly schools in rural areas of Western Australia, some with a secondary enrolment as small as 30 students. In some communities, schools also provide vocationally-oriented courses through agricultural education sections. In many rural centres post-compulsory education, for vocational or leisure purposes, is provided by technical education authorities. This service frequently uses the facilities available in the local school and utilizes teaching skills and knowledge available in the local community.

One feature of rural education in Australia has been the extensive consolidation of schools. In Western Australia this has reduced the number of government schools from 900 in 1935 to 659 in 1978. This has been generally

true of all Australian states although Victoria has retained proportionally more small rural primary schools than other states. Despite this pattern of consolidation, small primary schools are still a feature of rural areas. There are approximately 1,420 primary schools in Australia with an enrolment of less than 35 pupils and 794 with less than 20. Almost exclusively, these tiny schools are in rural areas.

In addition to these general provisions, the problems of extreme distance and isolation have led to the development of special education services for rural areas.[1] Typically, as in Western Australia, these have been important parts of the general education framework for some time and include many provisions for students who, due to the sparsity of population, do not have ready access to a school. For example, transport services are provided to bus children to schools within 50 kilometres of their homes. Alternatively, parents may be subsidized for the costs of transporting children to school. Hostels are provided in many regional centres and in Perth for students who wish to board away from home to attend school; the Commonwealth Government subsidizes these boarding costs. The Western Australian Correspondence School, in conjunction with five schools of the air and itinerant teachers, provides educational services for children of compulsory school age who are so isolated that they cannot attend schools, and

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1. A more detailed description of the services provided in the most sparsely populated areas of Western Australia is given in: 'Educational Provision in Sparsely Populated Areas of Western Australia', Studies in Rural Education, No.1, Education Department of Western Australia, 1979.

who are so isolated that they cannot attend shools, and who do not wish to board away from their homes. For isolated children beyond the compulsory school age, there is the Isolated Students Matriculation Scheme[1] (ISMS) which provides programmes incorporating correspondence tuition, camps and visiting tutorial support.

In small towns where there is no pre-school centre, pre-schoolers receive special attention through the Rural Integration Programme, a scheme whereby youngsters are included in regular school activities. Rural children with remedial problems, which are beyond the scope of the support services provided in the area, are catered for by the Chidley Education Centre[1], a residential service situated in Perth.

Special provisions for Aboriginal students include the Special Aboriginal Schools, where the educational programmes endeavour to accommodate and capitalize on the particular characteristics of the child's experiences. Specially trained itinerant support staff are also used, together with Aboriginal teacher aides. Extra support and funding is also provided for all schools with any Aborigines enrolled.

The Priority Country areas Program is a further special provision for rural areas. Funded by the Commonwealth Government, this is a Schools Commission programme directed

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1. See: Case Studies of the Isolated Students Matriculation Scheme and Chidley Education Centre, previously distributed to OECD SPA project participants.

at assisting rural schools and communities to identify their needs and devise activities to address those needs.[1]

(d) Costs of rural education

The cost of educating children by these special means can in some cases be as much as four times the cost of educating a child in an urban school situation. Even in cases where children attend local schools in rural areas, factors such as lower pupil teacher ratios, transportation, and teacher accommodation greatly compound costs. Loadings of up to 300 per cent have to be added to some school building construction costs in some of the more remote regions of the country.

Current forecasts suggest that the growth of government spending on education at the Commonwealth level and in at least some cases, at the state level, may be curtailed. At the same time, it is possible that the differential between the cost of educating a child in urban and rural areas will increase. Clearly, this suggests that education authorities will find themselves on the horns of a rural dilemma since, at a time when rural communities are becoming more vocal in their demand for upgrading or extension of services, less

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1. In 1979 the Priority Country Areas Program made available approximately $5 million for use by state and non-government education authorities in specifically designated rural areas. This programme operates through state and regional committees which provide opportunities for local people to determine their needs and propose remedies for them.

money may be available than in the past. Either the discriminatory funding in favour of rural schools will have to be extended, or new cost-saving means of educating rural children will have to be devised.

Cost-saving strategies in education have eluded Australian authorities in the past although the Conference did consider some potentially cost-saving innovations. For example, rural communities tend, by necessity, to be more self-reliant and have the capacity to mobilise community resources in such ways that unique solutions are often evolved to deal with local problems. This self-reliance is often combined with a tremendous energy and enthusiasm for improving local education provision. In the straitened economic times of today, communities provide a largely untapped resource which is likely to enrich and make more relevant both schools and other forms of educational provision. It was considered likely that the need to examine developments of this type would become even more urgent since the deliberate lowering of the standard of educational provision in rural areas is not, for clear political and humanitarian reasons, an option open to governments. Consequently, it seems likely that critical funding decisions will confront governments and education authorities in the near future.

3.0 OPTIONS FOR FUTURE ACTION

The provision of rural education in Australia has been characterized by a commitment to eliminating or reducing as far as possible any educational disadvantage that might result from a child living away from urban centres and larger towns. The Conference felt that Australian education provision has achieved a laudable equality of educational standards with respect to most facilities and services. This equality, combined with the many special measures adapted to suit particular characteristics of rural communities has resulted in a rural education system regarded by many as comparable in quality to any in the world. Even so, the conclusions that emerged during the Conference highlighted the need for initiatives to be taken by education authorities. Effectively these constitute a call for a re-assessment of rural education. It is within this context that Conference discussions on rural education were undertaken and conclusions reached.

It is pertinent to begin by describing five strong themes which emerged at the Conference and which should form a major part of the conceptual basis on which a re-assessment should be undertaken. The first of these themes urged that authorities support the development of broader roles to be played by educational institutions in rural communities.

The second consideration sought greater integration and co-ordination of public and community services (including education) at all levels of government. The third theme constituted a plea for meaningful devolution of decision-making responsibility to local communities. The fourth argued that more effective community participation in rural schools will promote their relevance and vitality. The fifth urged that education authorities discontinue the practice of applying urban standards and structures to rural schools, and that they allow the maximum exploitation of the strengths those schools display.

Using these themes as the conceptual basis for action, the foci for re-assessing rural education were identified. These included areas of special concern, curriculum, structure and control of rural education, the structure and scope of rural schooling, small rural schools, the roles of rural educators and support for them, and research options. The remainder of this section details the issues that were raised and the possible courses of action that were considered in each of these areas.

3.1 Areas of special concern

Although education authorities set out to guarantee a basic equality of educational opportunity, some groups of rural children were nominated by Conference participants as needing more direct attention. Groups identified as most often inadequately catered for included children of

aboriginal descent, girls, migrants, gifted and talented children, handicapped children, children of itinerent families and very isolated children who have no access to schools. Although these are not exclusively rural problems, the particular circumstances of such children are exacerbated by distance and logistic considerations found in rural areas. Therefore, for these groups in rural areas, effective equality of educational opportunity often does not exist.

A particular problem is that services provided for special groups have for too long been fragmented and uncoordinated. The Conference considered that the co-ordination of the services of regular and special schools, psychological services, specialist teachers, advisory teachers, therapists, curriculum specialists, research bodies, and community welfare agencies, would improve both the coverage and the quality of the services provided.

Such co-ordination requires co-operative action between all levels of government and the many non-government and semi-government agencies presently involved in the provision of services. Some of the problems to be overcome include territorial sensitivities, inadequate numbers of specialist staff, insufficient time allocated for consultation and joint planning, and problems arising from the separate training and fast turnover of professional staff. Such co-ordination is unlikely to occur without strong backing from the highest levels of government.

Participants felt that a priority for Education Department and other system authorities was to ensure that suitable staff are appointed to schools with large numbers of Aboriginal children, and to schools with migrant, gifted or handicapped students. These teachers must have the necessary empathy with and understanding of the backgrounds and needs of such students. Staffing of schools in this way clearly also has implications for the pre-service training of teachers and for the administrative arrangements that govern the provision of advisory and other support for such teachers.

Another area of concern which requires further action by education authorities is related to the problems faced by itinerant students and multi-cultural communities. Programmes to extend support to children and parents of ethnic minorities are often hampered by the dispersion of such groups in rural areas. Traditionally, the provision of support for such groups has been considered an urban "problem", because most of Australia's immigrant minority groups reside in cities; yet, the plight of the isolated migrant may be even more acute[1]. For multicultural

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1. Multi-cultural education has become a topic of special significance in recent years. Commonwealth authorities such as the Schools Commission, The Curriculum Development Centre and the Education Research and Development Committee have all made funds available for research and development activities in this area. The state education departments have also responded with various projects and programmes. However, the major emphasis has been on urban initiatives since most members of Australia's minority groups are city and suburban dwellers.

education it was considered that new programmes may best develop from the needs felt by those inside a culture rather than by being generated outside that cultural group. Similarly programmes should not be based on any presumed cultural deficits. Rather they should accept cultural differences as a strength of multicultural societies. An extension of this thinking suggests that programmes which expand local decision-making are preferable to those which limit it.

3.2 Curricula for rural schools

In Australia, over the last decade, there has been a trend towards the support and development of curriculum initiatives which are responsive to local conditions and needs. This has applied in both rural and urban areas. A curriculum that is locally relevant engenders community support for the school. It can also counterbalance unduly pervasive urban perspectives. Furthermore, it can have the strong pedagogic advantage of building upon a child's own knowledge and experience.

The potential for reflecting societal and community attitudes, values and experiences in curricula, is very evident in some Aboriginal communities in Australia. There, curricula are developed in keeping with Aboriginal people's desire to maintain their own life style, yet still allow them to function as members of Australian society.

However, one of the continuing dilemmas educators face is the question of how much local content can be incorporated in the curriculum before continuity and relevance to the wider society is lost, and options for children to move beyond the broader community are reduced. To address this dilemma, it was suggested that a system be adopted using broad system-wide guidelines, complemented by local adaptation. The guidelines would encourage a coherent K-12 programme so that continuity is ensured for children who move from one locality to another. Such guidelines can also be of assistance to teachers, since rural schools tend to have a relatively high staff turnover. The guidelines should reflect societal values and the knowledge necessary to allow students' progression to higher education or entry to the workforce. They would be supplemented, expanded and adapted through procedures that ensure the representation of local interests.

Thus it is not being argued that rural schools should aggresively seek an exclusively rural flavour. In fact, many Conference participants displayed considerable ambivalence on this particular point. If localising the educational offerings diminishes the ability of rural youth to compete effectively in the job opportunities of urban job markets, many country parents and teachers would not support such a policy. Most want to keep their children's options open: unique rural schools maybe, but not too unique. They see no necessary contradiction.

In rural areas, some factors constrain the adaptation of central guidelines to suit local conditions. These constraints include; the inexperience of staff, the broad diversity of minority groups and special needs groups in rural schools, and the difficulties of access to support staff and advisory assistance experienced in rural areas. Consequently, a call was made for the development of more clearly defined structures and support mechanisms as well as for clarification of the parts played in curriculum development by different levels within education systems.

Popular support was gained for a division of responsibility between central, regional and local authorities such that

- The central body formulates statements of aims, develops appropriate curriculum statements and syllabus guidelines, supports curriculum development at all levels and provides a wide variety of resources to support regions and schools in curriculum planning, implementation and evaluation.

- The region assists schools in curriculum development consistent with approved central statements, ensures the sharing and co-ordination of curriculum ideas, activities and resources, disseminates resources to support appropriate curriculum development, evaluates

the school's curriculum development and promotes the flow of information and advice between the central body and the schools.

- The school adapts approved statements of aims and curriculum guidelines in the formulation of school policy, assesses the needs of its children and its community, promotes staff competence in curriculum development, and develops, implements and continually evaluates, educational programmes for its students.

However, such a scheme is likely to have questionable appeal in some states in Australia where responsibility for a school's curriculum has traditionally been very much a school level matter.

3.3 The control of rural education

Three aspects of the structure and control of rural education received attention at the Conference. These aspects include firstly, the consideration of the role of education in rural communities, secondly, the locus of decision making in rural education and thirdly, an examination of the nature and extent of the responsibilities of education authorities and governments on education.

(a) Role of education in rural communities

More so than their urban counterparts, rural communities regard their schools as important community institutions possessing a broad range of functions over and

above those of educating their children. Furthermore, as rural communities contract and the trend towards regionalization of other services is extended, these functions of schools are likely to become increasingly significant. The smaller the community, the more important the school is likely to be. Governments and educators seem to have been slow to grasp the importance of this relationship, though there is a growing recognition that schools play important roles as employers in a small community, as foci for community social and recreational activities and as institutions of importance in the development and maintenance of community spirit and identity. In the small country towns that characterize rural Australia, it is becoming evident that the school can be the cement that binds a community together.

At the Conference, it was asserted that education authorities tend to underestimate the effect of policy decisions on rural communities. School consolidation was given as an example. Consolidation policies have closed many rural schools but the decision to close a school may dramatically accelerate the collapse of a community.

An interesting corollory to this observation and one which warrants exploration, is that education can be a significant force in the maintenance or revitalization of communities. Prime examples of this phenomenon were presented in some special situations such as in Aboriginal communities. In these communities education plays a central

role in community development. Other examples were also given which indicated the importance of the school in the development of rural community well-being generally.

(b) Locus of decision making

The respective roles of the central education authority, the region and the local school in the development of educational programmes have already been referred to in the context of curriculum development. The likelihood that schools will play broader roles in rural communities will increase demands for the clarification of these respective roles. It was in this context that the role of community members in schools came under scrutiny at the Conference.

A recommendation which gained strong support at the Conference was that both local communities and regional centres should have increased decision-making responsibilities in regard to the nature and form of services provided by rural schools. This point was made not only in regard to education, but with the likelihood of closer integration of education and other community services, to the whole range of community services in rural areas.

In the Australian context, regional authorities might acquire greater responsibility through the delegation to them of broader administrative responsibilities in areas such as staffing in their schools and in the selection and utilization of advisory and specialist support staff.

Developments along these lines are already advanced in some states. Reviews of decision making powers may have great impact; they may, for example, require the recasting of present regional boundaries.

However, in discussing regions' responsibilities, some notes of caution were struck by participants who argued that such devolution might result in merely shifting a central administrative style from a head office to a regional location, rather than developing mechanisms by which decisions might become more responsive to local conditions. System-level policies should comprise guidelines which can readily be adapted to suit the needs and circumstances of particular communities.

In focusing on the roles communities could play in decision making relating to educational services in rural areas, it must be borne in mind that rural schools tend to have much closer associations with their communities than do schools in urban areas. Schools in small rural towns are, in many cases, the most permanent institution in the town, and their principals and teachers are among the more highly educated citizens. They have often played significant leadership roles, particularly where their terms of residence has extended over several years. Nevertheless the general conclusions of the Conference were that even closer school-community relations were crucial to the success of rural schools.

The impressive array of existing school-community inter-relationships presented at the Conference formed the basis of a number of suggestions for maintaining and furthering these relationships. Suggestions included

- Development of mechanisms which would enable the local community to influence substantial decisions concerning the school to promote successful school-community involvement.

- Sharing of resources and expertise between the school and the community, to provide an effective start to broader interaction.

- Opening of schools to community participation and utilisation.

- Closer integration of schools with other community services.

In endeavours such as these, schools must be supported by their system authorities. The Priority Country Areas Program has provided examples of communities and schools participating in educational decision-making. It is likely that such examples will be valuable background in any moves to increase local decision-making. Attitudinal changes are needed by both communities and education authorities.

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Communities must accept that they have a significant and beneficial role to play in the operation and development of their local schools. Education authorities must support the extension of community participation and authority in the schools. Greater community participation requires school staffs and, in particular principals, to exercise high levels of management and other personal skills.

(c) Responsibilities of education authorities and governments

A central concern at the Conference was the lack of co-ordination and integration of services offered by both education authorities and other service agencies in rural communities. This problem has already been raised in the context of providing government services for special groups such as handicapped and isolated children.

The provision of agricultural education is another area where the co-ordination of services was identified as a concern. Agricultural education is primarily a responsibility of state authorities and is presently undertaken by a variety of bodies at secondary, tertiary and technical levels of education. Articulation of courses and co-ordination of services has not been systematic and has produced gaps and duplications in the provision of courses. Informal training needs of farming communities have tended to be neglected.

These examples show the need for greater co-ordination between different levels of governments and by different departments within governments. Further, it is likely that in the future, government agencies and private organizations may have to work in consultation.

Consideration was given at the Conference to strategies by which such co-operation might be achieved. Proposals that central agencies adopt co-ordinating roles were popular amongst participants. Regional administrators[1] may play a leading role in such developments. Extending local decision-making was regarded as an effective way of encouraging inter-departmental co-operation at the local level although the possibility was raised that separate structures, specifically designed to promote this co-operation, may be necessary. The possibility was also raised of developing and extending the roles of existing community organizations to give them greater scope for co-operative action. Two Western Australian examples of such local bodies which might play key co-operative roles are

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1. Regional Administrators are public servants appointed to rural regions in Western Australia to co-ordinate the activities of government agencies in those regions and to promote the effective use of those agencies by local people and organizations. The different states have different titles for such persons and have varying mechanisms designed to achieve such co-ordination.

Community Development Councils and Manpower Planning Committees which presently exist in some communities.[1]

It was recommended that such co-ordination should be preceded by the collection of local information outlining the range of educational and other agencies operating in the area. The existing needs for specialised services and the extent to which there are gaps or duplications in the present provisions should also be determined. In addition to being a necessary first step towards co-ordination of services, such an information gathering exercise may be an effective way to stimulate action.

While recognizing the importance of pursuing the goal of co-ordination and co-operation of service agencies, Conference participants also acknowledged some inherent difficulties. While rural schools might be appropriate bodies to initiate local attempts to increase co-operation between various agencies, they will not be very effective in this without active support from central authorities. It was agreed that policy changes were required and that action

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1. In Western Australia Manpower Planning Committees are regionally based groups, funded by local business interests, and comprised of people from a wide cross-section of the rural community, including representatives from local government and education, commerce and labour interests. They aim to co-ordinate the efforts of different sections of the community in developing a skilled labour force suited to the particular needs of the area. Regional development committees are organized under the auspices of the Department of Industrial Development and concentrate on the co-ordination of major and long-range developments of population and production in a region.

at state government level might be needed first. Further, promoting co-ordination and co-operation between agencies was recognized as being difficult to achieve. The possibilitiy of one or two major agencies, perhaps including the local school, adopting leadership roles was considered in this context.

3.4 The structure and scope of rural schooling

The Conference participants identified three inter-related pressures developing in rural areas which may force changes in the nature and scope of educational services in those areas. The first of these pressures is the increasing level of youth unemployment being experienced. This problem is not a purely rural one, but evidence was presented at the Conference showing that rural youth are more likely to be unemployed. The second pressure, is the increasing numbers of students remaining longer in rural secondary schools. The third pressure is the growing demand for more vocational and interest-related education to be provided in rural areas for people of all ages. Responses to these pressures could require fundamental changes in the structure, content and process of rural education. This need will be the more urgent because rural schools in Australia have tended to concentrate on the provision of academically-oriented courses designed to prepare students for further study.

The Conference agreed that only vigorous economic policies directed at creating employment opportunities, especially in rural areas, would provide any long term solution to the problem of youth unemployment. Schools alone will have little direct effect on this situation. However, if it continues, the high level of youth unemployment will force some reassessment of schools' present policies and practices[1] with regard both to the school to work transition of their students and their continuing educational needs.

Assuming that limited employment opportunities are likely to characterize the near future for school leavers, there was particular support for schools and systems taking action to expand and broaden their efforts to assist students in the transition from school to adult life. Information presented at the Conference suggested that girls in rural schools have particular difficulties in making this transition. Girls are more commonly unemployed and remain so for longer periods than boys. They also tend to seek lower status jobs. Their situations may be regarded as so serious as to constitute an early focus for action on state and Commonwealth transition programmes.

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1. The opportunities for schools and education authorities to undertake these activities will be enhanced by the recent announcement that the Commonwealth Government had agreed to provide matching grants, with the States, totalling $250 million over the next five years, to support activities directed at helping students make the transition from school to adult life.

Support was given at the Conference for the proposal that adolescents aged from 15-19 years be provided with greater economic and professional support to explore a variety of alternatives as they seek to make the change from school to adult life. This transition might involve those adolescents continuing their education (either full-time or part-time), leaving school to find a job but later returning to education, trying a variety of jobs and/or becoming involved in a variety of community development activities. In local areas this scheme might be administered by a group in which the school would have an important but not exclusive role.

Rural schools which have not already done so should be encouraged to establish close liaison with government agencies and employer bodies to find information relevant to career demands and future needs. Non-academic courses available in secondary schools should be extended and the opportunities of providing them for Year 8 to 10 students investigated. Work (or broader 'life') experience programmes should be made available to all secondary students. It was suggested that schools and education authorities should undertake further research[1] into the general range of experiences adolescents have after leaving

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1. Studies such as the Country School Leavers' Study being undertaken in Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland, the School Leavers' Project in South Australia and the Australian Council for Educational Research project entitled 'School, Work and Career: Seventeen Years Old in Australia', were cited as research activities which would increase the knowledge of educators about the post-school experiences of adolescents.

school. Such research could be a basis for the development in each school of a transition policy for all students, not just those leaving school to seek work.

In making these suggestions, Conference participants agreed that schools should retain a prime focus on the cognitive development of students. But the present functions of secondary schools in leading students to further education or full-time employment should be broadened to reflect more closely the variety of situations students are likely to experience on leaving school. This may require fundamental changes to the structure of secondary schools.

The increasing demand for recurrent education may also cause education authorities to reassess the nature of the educational provision they make in rural areas. In part this is likely to contribute to other pressures, already mentioned, to force rural secondary schools to broaden the range of courses they offer, the age ranges they cater for and the learning strategies that they employ. It is also likely to produce greater demands on organizations offering courses to matriculation level and courses which are more vocational or technical in orientation. The impact will be felt by the correspondence and extension services provided by school authorities and tertiary institutions. Co-ordination of the services offered by these different bodies will be a major responsibility of education authorities.

3.5 Small rural schools

The future of small rural schools was a topic of major interest during the Conference. The weight of discussion clearly favoured the retention of such schools. In fact, many arguments were put forward that small rural schools had such educational merit that they should be preserved at all costs.

Although there was considerable support during the Conference for the view that small rural schools, especially primary schools, can effectively meet the educational requirements of their communities, these schools will be able to continue achieving their aims only if they are appropriately staffed and supported. To be effective, staffing and support services must reflect the often unique needs of the communities and the roles that the schools play in them.

To be effective in the future, small rural schools will have to find a way of responding to additional pressures. Some of these pressures will result from schools adopting broader roles in their communities and from society making broader demands on its schools for reasons outlined in the previous section. These pressures are likely to affect all rural schools but will probably impact most directly on secondary schools. The Conference considered that issues

such as promotion of community development, effective use of increased leisure time and the development of recurrent education, were likely to be areas in which rural secondary schools might adopt a broader role. Secondary schools could well experience moves to expand the range of courses such as in adult vocational and technical education in order to provide a more comprehensive education service to rural communities.

Primary and secondary schools are more expensive to establish and operate in rural areas than they are in urban areas. Such cost differentials may increase in the future even if there are no changes in the level and nature of services. Given continuing pressure on overall education budgets, system authorities may have to review the means by which education is offered in rural areas either to effect cost savings or to ensure that maximum value is obtained from the money spent. Conference participants achieved no notable successes in determining ways in which cost savings could be effected. Rather, it was acknowledged that cost pressures would constitute tightly defined parameters within which changes suggested at the Conference would have to be considered.

The Conference suggested ways that education authorities can effectively support small rural schools as they adapt to these circumstances. Some of these suggestions were

- Developing policies and practices which capitalize on the acknowledged strengths of rural schools. For example, advocates argued that in the multigrade classrooms which characterize small rural primary schools, students develop thinking and independent learning skills, as well as the ability to co-operate with others. Policies and practices which are suited to such classroom organizational patterns should be promoted and extended.

- Piloting projects which explore the potential for using distance education strategies to broaden curriculum offerings and varying methods of course presentation in rural schools.

- Making more extensive use of school facilities to provide a wider range of services to rural areas.

- Initiating research and evaluation studies of appropriate organizational patterns which might be adopted.

- Using schools with existing innovative structural features as models.

- Appointing, perhaps at regional level, advisers to small schools.

- Integrating present subject divisions in school curricula.

- Examining critically the concept of the minimum enrolment which is currently used to determine the staff entitlement of small schools.

- Determining an appropriate balance between providing staff in one school, sharing staff between a number of schools, providing support staff on a regional or sub-regional basis and utilizing staff in an itinerant capacity.

- Exploring the implications for small schools of developments in educational technology.

These courses of action may or may not prove possible to implement in the current financial climate. Their general direction however, is clear. They are calling for an examination of the basic principles which underpin present staffing and resource allocation to rural schools. Furthermore, they question preconceptions of what is a 'school' and suggest that adjustments to popular views might be needed. A more general discussion of staffing policies in rural schools follows in the next section of this report.

3.6 The roles of rural educators and support for them

In the Australian context, staffing and resource allocation in government schools is a state education department responsibility. Consequently, a considerable equity in numbers and qualifications of staff is achieved.

Despite the achievement of this basic equity, Conference participants identified a number of problems and developments which have implications for the staffing of rural schools. This section will firstly describe those problems and developments, and then discuss their implications for staffing, training and professional development policies.

Some rural communities suffer from extreme mobility of teaching staff, resulting in a lack of continuity in the educational experiences of students. The promotional system tends to exacerbate this problem, since it leads to staffing policies which require that many staff, particularly young inexperienced staff, teach in rural areas before being eligible for promotion. A minimum length of service in country promotional positions in rural schools usually leads to urban school appointments. Paradoxically, some rural schools, particularly those in localities favoured as holiday resorts, have what some might regard as an overstable staff which can lead to stagnation of educational initiatives.

The appointment of young and inexperienced teachers and recently promoted administrators is also a characteristic of rural schools. The youth, inexperience and high mobility in rural school staff results partly from the fact that most teachers see their permanent homes in

urban areas, and that the larger urban schools are more prestigious and carry greater promotional opportunities for teachers.

Many teachers in small rural schools have not been trained to deal with the special characteristics of these schools. The greater variety of contents, teaching styles and structures in use in rural schools require that teachers be flexible, have a sound knowledge of the basic aims and strategies of teaching small classes with wide age and ability ranges and have a thorough knowledge of the types and availability of specialist support services. Teachers in rural schools require greater organizational skills and a willingness to experiment, adapt and try out different ideas. There is a special problem with early childhood education in multigrade classes, since many teachers are not familiar with strategies for teaching very young children. The Conference doubted the effectiveness of present pre-service training to equip teachers with the range of attributes demanded by small rural schools.

A further factor which must be considered when examining staffing considerations is the changing role of the school in rural communities. If the role of the rural school is to expand and diversify, teachers and more particularly principals, will be more actively involved with the community and its service agencies and will have to

adopt strategies and roles significantly different from those previously needed. Principals and teachers will be required to exercise skills of community leadership and development.

Rural schools are usually smaller than their urban counterparts. Consequently there is normally a narrower range of abilities and experiences represented in the fewer number of staff. This situation results in less flexibility in terms of the ranges of subjects and options that can be offered, particularly at the secondary level. Further, staffing policies commonly concentrate on providing generalist teachers with expertise in the core subjects in a school. Consequently, non-core subjects, which usually offer greatest scope for local adaptation, are often under-emphasised.

On appointment to country schools, teachers, most of whom are recruited from urban areas, are often unfamiliar with country life. The cultural and family backgrounds of country people, especially those in groups such as Aboriginals and itinerant families, are different from the teachers' experiences. The problem is alleviated somewhat in some areas by the use of locally recruited teacher aides. However, identification and training of these aides is especially difficult in isolated areas, and teachers are frequently inexperienced in the efficient use of them.

The general decline in the rate of growth of school enrolments is producing several changes in the characteristics of teachers as a group. Firstly, there are fewer new graduates entering the teaching force each year. As a consequence, the average age of teachers is increasing as is their average number of years of experience. Secondly, there are fewer promotional positions being created. As a consequence, teachers are having to wait increased lengths of time before promotion and they are likely to remain longer in any one school.

Increasing stability and experience of staff is likely to reduce two frequently cited disadvantages of rural schools - those of the inexperience and high turnover of staff. However, these changes also have other implications. With a smaller proportion of the teaching force having had recent contact with pre-service teacher education, the onus falls more heavily on teacher development and in-service structures to keep teachers abreast with current developments. Teacher development activities have long been regarded as a major problem in rural areas since the access teachers have to support services is sometimes restricted due to problems of distance and cost. In the future it will be more important that effective solutions are found to these problems.

Changes which may emerge in response to the developments and problems outlined above have fundamental implications for staffing and support policies of system authorities, teacher development activities, the integration of school staffs into communities and pre-service education.

(a) Staffing and staff support policies

Education authorities must focus attention on the high mobility of staff in some schools (and, to a lesser extent, the high stability of staff in some schools). To reduce the mobility of staff, policies and procedures must be developed which ensure that teachers in rural schools are not disadvantaged financially, socially, or professionally in comparison with teachers in urban schools. To some extent, the increasing over-supply of teachers can be expected to stabilise staffing. Even so, policies which themselves promote high staff turnover require scrutiny. It seems, for example, that the promotion system in government schools contributes significantly to the high mobility rate.

The difficulties of teaching in rural schools, combined with the greater potential for professional isolation of the teachers, dictate that education authorities give high priority to providing those teachers with as much advisory and other professional support as possible.

Conference participants also argued that authorities should investigate the use of some 'suitability' criteria in the selection and appointment of teachers to rural schools. This would ensure that staff were more sensitive to rural aspirations and circumstances, and would possibly contribute to reducing the mobility of teachers.

Education authorities were also urged to conduct thorough reviews of their staffing and support policies, particularly from the perspective of the impact they have on the flexibility with which the schools can react to local needs and circumstances. This may mean that existing staffing practices may have to be fundamentally changed. For example, the notion that all courses are taught by teachers appointed to the school may be modified by the provision of some courses through correspondence or audio-visual techniques with the teachers on site acting as tutors rather than teachers.

(b) Teacher development activities

Teacher development activities should enable teachers to tailor their activities to the social and organizational patterns of the particular school and its community. This implies that teachers and community members should have an influential voice in both the content and conduct of in-service programmes.

Foci for professional development activities might include

- The values of community participation and the processes by which it can be fostered.
- Procedures for introducing local adaptations to curriculum.
- The values and circumstances of life in the particular rural area examined from the perspective of recently appointed staff.
- Different school organization styles.
- Assisting teachers to develop programmes for gifted and other exceptional children.
- Teacher exchanges with teacher education institutions.
- Briefings for newly appointed principals about the school, its community and ways of maintaining and developing community participation.
- The system-level support staff and resources and the regional support services available and how teachers can use them.

To reduce problems of distance and cost which limit teachers' access to teacher development activities, several suggestions were made. One suggestion was that teacher support services make greater use of the audio-visual delivery systems which characterise some educational

services to isolated students such as are used in the Isolated Students' Matriculation Scheme operating in Western Australia, and the correspondence materials used in pre-school education in Queensland. Further suggestions included use of meetings of teachers within schools, exchanges of teachers between nearby schools, and larger schools 'adopting' smaller schools for exchanges and communications.

(c) Integration of teachers into communities

Data from case studies of rural communities discussed at the Conference indicated that smaller rural communities are likely to have relatively well defined expectations about the performance of the school and individual staff members. Staff members are more likely to be effective and enjoy their work in schools when they have been made to feel integral members of the local community. Residents of rural towns as well as education authorities, must bear some responsibility for the effective and early integration of recently appointed staff into the community. However, teachers are often short term residents and they often form distinct social groups within a community. Many commute to urban homes at weekends. These characteristics militate against achieving this integration. Nevertheless, examples presented at the Conference which might serve as models for future activity in this regard included the holding of civic receptions to welcome teachers to communities, and the sponsoring of programmes and strategies through local service clubs, even those as simple as 'have a teacher for tea today'.

(d) Pre-service teacher education

In Australia, pre-service teacher education is undertaken by universities and colleges of advanced education. Selection of trainee teachers is made by these independent institutions predominantly on the basis of academic achievement in tertiary entrance examinations. The suitability of a particular person for appointment to a particular location and that person's empathy for the circumstances of life in a rural area do not seem to have been factors considered in either the selection or training of teachers for rural schools.

In recent decades, the specific preparation of teachers for rural teaching, appears to have disappeared from the programmes of most teacher education institutions. Once, special 'rural demonstration schools' were an integral part of college training and were located close to them. It seems inappropriate that such specifically rural aspects of teacher training have disappeared. Pre-service teacher education should acknowledge that most graduates are likely to teach in rural areas at some point in their careers, especially during their early teaching years. On graduation, many beginning teachers find themselves in a school which has many unfamiliar organizational patterns. As well, teachers may have irregular or infrequent access to support and advisory services. Their students may be drawn from a diversity of unfamiliar social and cultural backgrounds. They may feel lost in the social milieu of the town.

The transition from graduation to first school appointment requires examination. The universities and colleges have no control over the appointments of graduates. They cannot guarantee a rural or an urban appointment. Since there is little, if any, rural flavour in training courses, education authorities are not able to use criteria of suitability when appointing teachers to rural areas. The lack of such criteria may be related both to high teacher turnover in rural areas, and to the difficulties faced by some rural schools in adapting to the needs of their communities.

There are several strategies which might warrant investigation to alleviate these problems. A closer liaison between education authorities, rural schools, rural teachers, community members and teacher training institutions might be fostered. This might involve the development of closer links between teacher training and teacher development services. Procedures used by teacher training institutions to select teaching candidates might include the strategy of ensuring that rural dwellers and other special groups are well represented in the teaching service. In this way, schools could be allocated staff who have both local knowledge and the background of the teaching profession and its broader social context.

The call for strengthening of commitment on the part of the pre-service teacher institutions towards the preparation of teachers for teaching in rural schools was made strongly at the Conference. The time for such a review is opportune, given the various state and national enquiries into teacher education which have recently been completed or are drawing to a close.

3.7 Directions for research

There were frequent calls during the Conference for further research. It was made clear that key decisions in the rural educational arena will be made on the basis of a fragmented understanding of issues until such time as substantial studies of the problem areas are undertaken.

Several areas were identified as having a special priority. High on the list was the need for research into the impact of modern technology on the delivery of education services to rural areas. This topic was given a special sense of urgency owing to the imminence of a Commonwealth Government decision concerning the establishment of a Domestic Satellite Communications system. The prospect of continuing rises in fuel costs, and speculation regarding the longer term effect of this trend upon the provision of rural services was also highlighted. The potential effects of these developments are so significant that research to inform policy-makers was considered to be needed urgently.

Other targets for research included

- Aboriginal and multi-cultural education from pre-primary to tertiary levels.

- Identification procedures and appropriate programmes for exceptional children (including the more able children).

- Organizational and staffing patterns and practices in rural schools.

The Conference also endorsed the importance of evaluating existing rural education projects. Valuable lessons could be learned from the progress of these activities and programmes, which could stand future initiatives in good stead.

While more policy oriented research may be required, the current commitment in this area should not be dismissed as inconsequential. For example, a number of studies across the nation are separately looking at the problems of country schools leavers. References has already been made to several of these studies. A problem with the current research effort however, is that it appears to lack co-ordination. Tertiary institutions, historically, have been wary of supporting structures that may potentially limit their traditional independence. Yet there would seem to be a strong case for State and Commonwealth authorities to consider the development of some mechanism for ensuring that the limited resources available for study of education in the rural sector are not unnecessarily duplicated or

dissipated. Much could be gained from identifying and supporting the network of researchers with interests in the study of rural education.

In this context, it was noted that there were marked advantages of having international perspectives presented at the Conference. The promotion and maintenance of international links was endorsed. Such links highlight trends, similarities and differences between countries and consequently prompt education authorities to re-examine the structures and assumptions of their own situations.

While it is critical that governments and their instrumentalities acquire a broad understanding of the forces that impinge upon the provision of rural education services, it does not necessarily follow that such understandings will develop from large, across-the-broad aggregations of data. Many Conference participants drew attention to the diversity of communities and environments that could be regarded as 'rural'. Rural education policies need to accommodate differences between rural communities. A useful research strategy might therefore be to undertake indepth case studies of regions or communities. Such micro level research should ideally be of a 'multi-disciplinary' nature, reflecting the complex array of factors that determine the quality of rural education and the role it plays in maintaining rural communities.

At present in Australia there seems to be no agency or authority which operates with a sufficiently broad charter that would enable it to draw together the understandings derived from a multiplicity of disciplines such as demography, economics, government and sociology. It seems that important trends emerging from these disciplines are only incidentally monitored and taken into account when formulating education policies. Yet the Conference convincingly underlined the shortcomings of considering educational issues without reference to developments in other disciplines. Steps should be taken to diminish such myopic planning, though the difficulties in integrating such knowledge bases should not be underestimated.

4.0 CONCLUSION

While a good deal of the discussion during the Conference amounted to a vindication or endorsement of current policy and practice, suggestions for significant development and redirection were voiced and received strong support. The most fundamental issue that coloured many of the specific recommendations for change concerned the relationship between the rural school and its community. Wide support was given to the position represented by the following propositions:

(1) Support must be given for educational institutions adopting broader roles in rural communities.

(2) Rural areas will require greater integration and co-ordination of all public and community services, including education, and this will require action from all levels of government.

(3) In future more decisions regarding the organization, structure and functioning of rural education should be taken in local areas by people directly involved,

(4) Encouraging useful community participation in rural schools can be a major way of enhancing the relevance and vitality of those schools.

(5) Structures and processes of rural education will be most effective when they capitalize on the strengths of the organizational, economic and social environment of the schools.

These propositions are of such critical importance that they should form a major part of the background within which any review is undertaken of any aspect of rural education.

Within this broad charter, more specific directions for action became clear. These touched upon most facets of the educational provision in rural Australia.

• Current practices and initiatives in rural education appear to be undertaken without a sufficient appreciation of the cost structures. Two trends in educational spending require urgent reconciliation. One is an overall slowing down and, in some cases, reduction of expenditure on education. In conjunction with this, the other trend is an increasing divergence of the costs of providing educational services in rural areas compared with those in urban areas. In the face of these trends, governments appear to be faced with three options:

- Reducing the current level of educational service in rural areas.

- Continuing to increase the existing disparity in funding which presently favours rural areas.

- Finding alternative, cost effective means of providing educational services in rural areas.

Policy making bodies should, as a matter or urgency, undertake or commission major planning studies in these areas.

• The closure of small rural schools in favour of larger central schools may no longer be the cost saving policy that its proponents have argued it to be. Rising transportation costs and the failure to find more cost effective alternatives to the small rural school give weight to the recommendation that small rural primary and secondary schools should be preserved. Education authorities should

review their criteria for closure, and wherever possible consider strategies that will bolster the school as an institution with a responsibility for maintaining the community fabric as well as educating children. Efforts by communities to broaden the role of their schools should receive the strong backing of education authorities.

- Most rural children in Australia have access to schools which are equipped and staffed at levels which compare most favourably with other OECD member countries. The most urgent priorities for providing services in rural areas lie not with across-the-board improvements, but with special rural groups. Despite considerable efforts and commitment, much more needs to be done for Aboriginal children. Other groups deserving of special attention include children with handicaps, children with different ethnic backgrounds, girls, children of itinerant families, and children with special gifts or talents. Because of their geographic isolation and dispersion such children are often unable to avail themselves of special services. Further, even when available, these services are commonly provided on an infrequent and unco-ordinated basis. This is particularly evident where the services required to satisfy children's educational and other needs cross the boundaries of government departments and other agencies. Government departments have responsibilities to examine duplications and gaps in the services to these, groups and to take steps to improve the co-ordination of the services each provides.

• A strength of education in rural Australia is the quality of staff assigned to rural schools. However, most observers agree that this strength is not fully exploited owing to mobility of teachers who, through transfer or promotion, seek new positions usually in the schools in suburbs of the major cities. It is claimed that the interests of rural communities and sometimes of the teachers themselves, are subservient to the requirements of the staffing policies and promotional structures. A simple resolution of this problem will not be forthcoming. There is evidence to suggest that no single incentive is likely to alter radically the present pattern of teacher mobility. Nonetheless, the issue appeared to be of such over-riding concern that educational authorities should examine present staffing and promotional structures with a view to extending, at least to a degree, the duration of teacher appointments in rural communities.

• Government policies which set out to increase the economic viability of rural communities and regions, though decentralization of industry and establishing business, and other incentives, should receive strong support. In any such ventures, education should be regarded as a partner in development rather than a service to be provided at the tax payers' expense. Governments should involve educational authorities more closely in economic planning for rural development.

• During recent years, schools throughout Australia have been encouraged to adapt central curriculum guidelines to suit local circumstances. Terms such as 'school-based curriculum development' and 'locally relevant curriculum' appear in recent literature on rural education. However for the foreseeable future, most Australians will live in large urban centres. Many parents who live in rural areas expect their children to eventually become city dwellers. They wish to see an education which enables their children to take advantage of job opportunities that they believe are available in cities. In modifying curricula, schools should not lose sight of system-wide objectives which are necessary to provide children with continuity of curriculum experiences and equality of career opportunity with their urban peers.

• Pre-service teacher education in Australia is currently undergoing review at both Commonwealth and State levels. Opportunities exist to reconsider training requirements of teachers who, in the main, are likely to receive rural postings early in their career. Actions such as re-examining the criteria for the selection of teachers, providing teaching practice in country areas, providing special courses on rural education, and developing bonds between teacher training institutions and rural schools deserve special consideration. Vigorous efforts should be made to make pre-service teacher education authorities more conscious of the special requirements of successful teaching in rural areas.

- Many persons living in rural areas look forward to improvements in the provision of education services through new communications technology, such as domestic satellites. Conference experts in this area indicated only guarded optimism for this approach. Rather than concentrate on the hardware of new communications systems, education authorities should focus on the quality of the educational programmes to be transmitted.

- At present there is a limited data base for the development of rural education policies. The research that has been undertaken in the area has been diffuse in its focus and restricted in its scope. Many calls were made during the Conference for further research. If research into the issues and problems surrounding rural schools is to have effect, then increasing support and co-ordination will be necessary. Responsibilities for initiating and supporting such a research programme will lie with Commonwealth and state authorities.

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